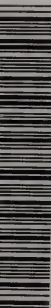


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THE BELIEF IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

BY

Rev. Professor J. M. SHAW, D.D.



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THE BELIEF IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

For University of Toronto

John M. Shaw

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THE BELIEF IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

A DISTINGUISHED preacher has told of his little girl saying to him one day with engaging frankness, "Daddy, I think I know what you mean when you say that you believe in the Father and in the Son, but I cannot understand the meaning of belief in the Holy Ghost." In this frank confession we have the thoughts of many older minds and hearts revealed.

The belief in the Holy Spirit is one of the three great fundamental beliefs in which the essence of the Christian faith has been summed up and expressed in the Church's historic creed, called "the Apostles' Creed"; the other two being the belief in "God the Father Almighty," and the belief in "Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord." Of these three beliefs, or, as perhaps we should rather say, of this three-fold belief, the belief in the Holy Spirit is that which in the early Church was looked on as the crowning or culminating belief of the Christian faith, because that to which the other two led up, and that through which alone they came to effective realization and expression

in life. For us to-day, however, this belief in the Holy Spirit has largely lost its pristine significance, and the festival of Pentecost which commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit has failed to capture the imagination of the Church in the way that Christmas and Easter have done, the festivals of the Incarnation and Resurrection of our Lord. So much so that one of our greatest needs in the Christian Church to-day is to recover the early Church's emphasis ; to recover and rediscover the vitally important significance of this crowning belief or doctrine of our Christian faith.

I.

Probably the best way to realise the significance of the belief and see its vital importance, is to approach it historically ; to recall the historical context in which the belief arose in the early Church.

It is recorded that before Jesus went to His death on the Cross, as He was met with His disciples in the Jerusalem Upper Room on the night before the Crucifixion, He sought to comfort them with these words : " It is expedient for you,"—better for you, not for your loss but for your gain—" that I go away." " I will not

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leave you desolate (lit. orphans) ; I will come to you " (John xvi. 7 ; xiv. 18).

These were strange words surely for a parting or farewell message. Not so do ordinary men speak in view of their death and approaching departure. One thinks of what is probably the nearest analogous scene in history to the story of Jesus' last hours with His disciples, as told in the Gospels, *viz.* the story of the last hours of Socrates with his disciples, as recorded by Plato in the *Phaedo*. He is going away from them, Socrates says, and they feel they will be "orphans"—the very same word as our Lord is represented as employing. He believes that it will be well for himself to go ; he will be set free from misunderstanding and persecution. But well for them—no, he does not say that. Or one thinks of Paul in a similar situation. " I have a desire to depart, and to be with Christ which is far better," far better for myself, " nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you " (Philippians i. 23f). But not so Jesus, apparently. His going away, His bodily departure, His withdrawing from them as a bodily visible presence, would be, He indicated, not for His disciples' or followers' loss, but rather for their gain.

What did He mean? He went on to explain. " If I go not away the Comforter,"

the Empowerer, or, to use Wyclif's translation, the "Helper," "will not come unto you. But if I depart I will send Him unto you" (John xvi. 7). And when He is come, He promised, they would realize a closer, more intimate and therefore more empowering or enabling fellowship with Himself than they had experienced when He was bodily present with them on earth. The coming of the Holy Spirit, that is to say, He indicated was not to be thought of merely as a compensation or substitute for an absent Christ, a kind of second-best. No; it was actually to be better for them, they would be able to do greater things than when He Himself was bodily present with them, for the Spirit's presence was to be not a Power acting on behalf of an absent Christ, but rather a higher, more helpful mode of Christ's own presence, a more spiritual inner and abiding presence of Christ, a presence not merely with them, but in them, an inner Divine empowering presence lifting them to a new plane of life and service.

And when the promise was fulfilled and the Spirit came in fullness at Pentecost, we see the wonderful change or transformation effected in the minds and lives of the disciples. A new stimulating, exhilarating consciousness is theirs of a new power in their lives according to the promise, "Ye shall receive power when the

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Holy Spirit is come, and (then) ye shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth " (Acts i. 8). So that we read, " With great power gave the apostles witness " (Acts iv. 33). Weakness has given place to strength, cowardice to courage, sadness to joy. Winter has given place to Spring, shadow to sunshine. It is life on a new level, life " in the Spirit," life in fellowship or communion with a risen, living Christ through the Holy Spirit.

II.

It was not that now for the first time the Spirit was thought of as becoming operative in human life and history. That is not the Scripture representation.

Already in the Old Testament the Spirit is represented as at work in nature, the author and source of life in its ordered ascending stages. In the Genesis account of creation the Spirit is depicted as brooding on the face of the waters of primeval chaos (i. 2), bringing order out of confusion, and calling into being the ascending orders of existence—" the principle of creative evolution or development," as science and philosophy would speak of it to-day. It is represented, too, in the Old Testament as active

and operative in the life of man, the author and source of all unusual extra-ordinary or super-ordinary gifts of physical, intellectual or moral and spiritual attainment. Especially active in the minds and hearts of the Old Testament prophets, enabling them to discern and interpret the Divine working and to live their lives in its power.

Then when we come over to the New Testament, the Spirit is represented as active in a fullness of measure never before seen in human history in the life of Jesus Himself. That life of perfect obedience and holy loving service, a veritable new beginning or "miracle" in human history, was a life accomplished through living in the power of the Spirit. It was "in the power of the Spirit," Luke tells us in his Gospel (iv. 14), that Jesus began His ministry, and in that same power all His ministry was fulfilled. And, more than that, the miracle in which the life closed or rather, as the New Testament writers put it, in which the life made a new beginning after being done to death on the Cross—the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus—that miracle is represented in the New Testament as the result of the working of "the exceeding greatness" of the power of God's Spirit.

No ; it was not that now for the first time at Pentecost the Spirit was thought of as becom-

ing active or operative in human life and history. Rather it is that now for the first time it was realized that that Power of God, that Divine Creative Energy, the very nature of which is to be and to do beyond and above what we of ourselves can do—super-natural, super-human—that that power of God's Spirit, the greatness of which was most fully manifested in the resurrection of Jesus had now, through the work of Jesus on earth and through His risen exalted working, become a power within man; the Above and Beyond becoming the Within, lifting him to a new level of life and power and so described as "a life-giving Spirit" (I Corinthians xv. 45)—in the words of the Creed, "the Lord and Giver of life." It was indeed the continuation and prolongation of the Resurrection; the continuation and prolongation of the resurrecting, recreating energy of God's Spirit raising believers in Christ unto "newness of life."

III.

According to Luke's account in Acts ii., the creative experience of the Spirit's presence and power at Pentecost was an experience of such emotional intensity and vividness that, like all strange, glowing experiences that trans-

form man and change history, it was more easily described in picturesque figurative or symbolic language than in the terms of common speech. The first mighty inrush of the Spirit's power into the channels opened for it by the work of Christ Luke, in the opening verses of Acts ii., compares to the influence of "wind" and of "flame" or "fire," quickening and cleansing phenomena already associated with the Spirit in the Old Testament. Reference is made also in the earlier part of this Chapter to a phenomenon which is described as "speaking with tongues" which, Luke undoubtedly suggests, consisted in speaking in foreign languages, a kind of miraculous endowment of the first disciples enabling them to proclaim the Gospel to the different peoples assembled in Jerusalem from different countries for the feast of Pentecost. Such a representation seems a reflection of a current Jewish tradition or legend that at Sinai the Law was given in seventy different languages so as to be intelligible to all the nations—a giving of the Law which was commemorated by the Jews annually at Pentecost. Luke's subsequent references, however, both in this second chapter and in later chapters, like the references to it in Paul's letters, suggest a different interpretation. They suggest that it consisted in a kind of excited, ecstatic

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utterance in language unintelligible to others, a kind of incoherent speaking to God rather than to men, a phenomenon which may be properly described not as "speaking in a foreign language" but as "speaking in another or strange language," the language of heaven which, though unintelligible to men, was intelligible to God. This "gift of tongues," Paul tells us, came to have such an exaggerated emphasis placed upon it in the Church of Corinth that he felt it necessary to criticize or depreciate the value of the gift from the point of view of the Church's edification or up-building. "Better," he said, "in the church speak five words with the understanding that I might teach others than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue" (1 Corinthians xiv. 19). It was Paul's great achievement in this connexion to suggest, indeed, to effect, an epoch-making change of emphasis in the early Church's evaluation of the different manifestations of the Spirit's power and working. Not in any spasmodic, temporary, exceptional or abnormal gifts of emotion or ecstasy such as the gift of tongues, which, after all, was the gift of the few, but in the abiding, normal manifestations of His working in fruits of character and changed lives which were possible for all, was the evidence of the Spirit's power to be seen. "The fruit of the Spirit," he wrote,

“ is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control ” (Galatians v. 22f). In a word, the proper manifestation of the Spirit’s presence and power is the production of Christ-like character, the re-incarnation of the Spirit of Christ in life.

IV.

Such a representation of the character of the Spirit’s working is in line with Jesus’ own representation, as this is before us specially in the Fourth Gospel. Three chief characterizations, or manifestations, of the Spirit’s power and working are there referred to.

First. The Spirit is spoken of as the Spirit of truth, leading men into fuller truth and fuller realization of the significance of Christ’s person and saving work. This aspect of the Spirit’s working is emphasized and defined in the last discourse of our Lord to His disciples. “ I have yet many things to say to you,” He is represented as saying, “ but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit, when He the Spirit of truth is come He shall guide you into all truth . . . He shall glorify me for He shall take of mine and shall declare it unto you ” (John xvi. 12-14). And the New Testament is itself the great proof and evidence of the fulfilment of this promise.

It is often said by way of criticism of the apostolic teaching as to the significance of Jesus' person and work that it goes beyond the teaching of Jesus Himself, as recorded in the Gospels, so that we must get "back from Paul" or "back from John" to "the simple teaching of Jesus." But this advance or progress was in line with Jesus' own promise as to the work of the Spirit as the Spirit of truth. He Himself had been limited in His interpretation of the significance of His own work on earth by the disciples' inability to understand or appreciate. So that in Jesus' own recorded teaching we have no right to look for a full or adequate interpretation of His life and work. As Dr. Dale of Birmingham put it: "After all, Jesus came not to preach the Gospel but that there might be a Gospel to preach." And, as a matter of fact and history, it was only after the basis for the Gospel had been laid in His life and death that through the Resurrection and the coming of the Spirit the disciples came really to understand the true significance of Jesus and of His life and work on earth. And all down the ages the Spirit as the Spirit of truth has been at work on the basis of Christ's life and work on earth, leading men into ever fuller truth and understanding of Christ's work and worth.

Second. The Spirit is referred to by Jesus

Himself as the Spirit not only of truth but of holiness, and so explicitly called the Holy Spirit. "When He is come He will convince the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment" (John xvi. 8). And all through the New Testament the Spirit is specifically and characteristically the Spirit of holiness as well as of truth, having the fruitage of its working "in all goodness and righteousness and truth" (Ephesians v. 9). So that the Christian life or character in its beginning, middle and end is represented as the Spirit's work. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control" (Galatians v. 22f).

In short,

"Every virtue we possess
And every victory won
And every thought of holiness
Are His alone."

Third. The Spirit is represented by Jesus Himself as most inclusively and comprehensively the Spirit of power, and of power especially for witnessing and service. "Ye shall receive power," the risen Jesus is recorded as saying to His disciples "when the Holy Spirit is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto Me" (Acts i. 8). Power beyond man's own achieve-

ment, power super-human or super-natural—this, as we have seen, was the root-idea of the Spirit's working in the Old Testament. And this is the root-idea in the word of Jesus, according to the Gospel records, to describe the Spirit's work—the word translated “Comforter” in the A.V. but in the original a much more forceful, energetic word than the word “Comforter” suggests to us to-day, even Fortifier, Strengtheners, or, in Wyclif's translation, “Helper.” And when the promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, as we have seen above, the disciples were possessed with the stimulating, exhilarating consciousness of a new power in their lives, so that we read “With great power gave the apostles witness” (Acts iv. 33). It was a witnessing not merely by word, not primarily indeed by word, but by life so that they could say, as some of the early Christian Apologists are on record as saying, “We speak not great things, we live them.”

V.

So then, when in the words of the Creed we say “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” we mean at least three great and vital things. We mean, *first*, that we believe in guidance into ever fuller truth and ever fuller realization of the signifi-

cance of Christ for the life of the individual and of society. We mean, *second*, that we believe in the possibility of progress in holiness, of "growth of grace" and of ever fuller consecration of life to the Lordship of Christ. And we mean, *third*, that we believe in the ever-present possibility of spiritual reinforcement and empowerment for Christian witness and service. In short, we mean that we believe in the abiding presence and working of the Spirit of God and of the risen living Christ in the Church to guide, to sanctify, to inspire and empower His followers for the ever-fuller realization of the purposes for which He lived and died and rose again.

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